

Contact: Pam McKeown
ODMHSAS Public Information Office
(405) 522-5102

DATE

STATE NEEDS MORE TRANSITIONAL LIVING FACILITIES FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, DEPUTY COMMISSIONER SAYS

If Julie Young, Oklahoma’s deputy commissioner for domestic violence/sexual assault services, could make one major change in services, it would be this: Increase the number of transitional living facilities for victims trying to rebuild their lives.

A division of the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, the domestic violence/sexual assault services program contracts with more than 35 emergency shelters statewide, all of which offer a range of services to victims.

Presently, only four state programs offer transitional living services – Acmi House in **Altus**; Women in Safe Home (WISH), Inc., in **Muskogee**; YWCA of Oklahoma City Crisis Services, **Oklahoma City**; and Help in Crisis, Inc., in **Tahlequah**.

“Victims who ultimately leave abusive relationships need somewhere safe to go where they can rebuild their lives,” she said. “Two or three weeks in a domestic violence shelter isn’t enough time to help these victims – primarily women and children – move much beyond the crisis mode. Safety is our primary focus, but substance abuse and mental health issues also are present in many cases. A lot of these women also need help in getting connected to other types of services, such as employment, vocational training

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or college, plastic surgery or medical care if physical injury is extensive, legal representation, child care and counseling services.

“Our crisis shelters are doing a good job meeting many of these needs in the short term, but longer-term assistance for victims is needed,” Young said. “At transitional living facilities, they can be safe and save up their money while they work or go to school. They are charged only minimal housing fees. Also, survivors and their children receive emotional support because of the counselors on staff.”

Mental health and substance abuse issues are tightly linked with many domestic violence and sexual assault cases, Young said, adding that clients could benefit from longer-term exposure to counseling services.

“There’s a huge connection between domestic violence and substance abuse,” Young said. “Substance abuse increases the lethality and severity of abuse. More than half of those accused of murdering their spouses, as well as almost half of the victims, had been drinking alcohol at the time of the incident. Substance abuse also can be an outcome of domestic violence – many victims and survivors use drugs and alcohol to cope with the problem.”

Children, also, are highly susceptible to emotional and substance abuse problems later in life stemming from living in abusive households.

“Children who witness acts of violence against their mothers may come to believe that violent behavior is an acceptable way to express anger, frustration or control,” said Young. “Nearly 40 percent of children who observe or experience violence in their

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families are at increased risk themselves for becoming involved in a violent relationship in adulthood. The tie-in with substance abuse is significant in virtually all aspects of domestic violence, from the perpetrators to the victims to the children who watch and oftentimes are physically abused, as well.”

In fiscal year 2002, ODMHSAS contract facilities provided domestic violence/sexual assault services to nearly 10,000 Oklahomans (nearly 5,500 adults and 2,650 children for domestic violence, and 1,500 adults and 325 children for sexual assault). Young estimates three times that many people actually qualify for services.

“Intimate partner violence occurs in one out of every six couples,” she said. “A survey conducted in 1999 by our department found that nearly 136,000 Oklahoma women had been abused in some manner in the 12 months prior to the survey. Nearly 30,000 of these women were victims of physical violence. These numbers don’t include the fact that nearly 40 percent of females are victims of attempted or completed rape during their lifetimes.”

Presently, most ODMHSAS contract facilities provide immediate emergency shelter and crisis counseling to victims of domestic violence or sexual assault. Many programs also provide legal advocacy services to help in filing protective orders or other documents; and referrals to employment services or job-training programs, housing, medical care, child care, and outpatient mental health or substance abuse counseling.

“Not all facilities provide all services, but if they don’t offer a particular service such as employment training, which may be the case in some rural areas, they will provide referral,” Young said.

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Before contracting with shelters, the state agency conducts an extensive certification screening to ensure facilities are operating quality programs, she added.

“This certification process covers everything from safety procedures to hours of operation to counseling procedures,” she said. “A program has to meet our standards before we will contract with it for services.”

Domestic violence shelters are doing a good job with limited resources, but more could be done to help victims and survivors of domestic violence.

“Domestic violence and sexual assault are horrendous problems in Oklahoma,” she said. “Every day, you read a story about a woman who has been shot or stabbed by her husband or boyfriend. We don’t hear about the thousands of women and children who need and want out of abusive relationships, but have nowhere to go. More services, especially long-term transitional living facilities, would help them get out and rebuild their lives.

“Two weeks in a shelter is simply not enough,” she added. “Oftentimes, victims have been isolated for years from friends, family and community. They may not have a job or any training to help them get a job, because of the isolation. The only way they can become self-sufficient is to have someone help them.”

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